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True West

By

CHRIS TOALSON

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

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Dan Larkin, Committee Chair

Date

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True West

By

CHRIS TOALSON

B.A., Photography, Montana State University, 2007
M.F.A., Imaging Arts, Rochester Institute of Technology, 2009

This thesis, *True West*, utilizes photography to investigate the myth of the American West. I reflect on the ways that myth has been used to symbolically situate the West at the heart of our American identity, in order to discern our seeming fascination with this imagined West. Looking to photography's historical precedence as a purveyor of myth, my photographs explore notions of representation and re-presentation to question both photographic truth and western authenticity. I focus on the intertwining of history and myth, where more often than not, myth prevails. *True West* urges a refocus toward a more factual history, where truth and imagination are more clearly defined and their ambiguities are acknowledged.

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Chapter 1 Introduction

True West calls into question the seeming American fascination with the American West. The current state of the West is one where history has become intertwined with myth, where each influences the other, and where more often than not, myth prevails. Stereotypes have become the norm. The West has been reduced to majestic landscapes where heroic cowboys battle a vanishing Indian race over the purity of American values. In nearly every tourist stop, art gallery, museum, clothing store and advertisement it becomes more apparent that these tales have saturated our collective consciousness. Symbolically, we have situated the West at the heart of our American identity; it embodies what we as Americans want to believe about ourselves and our national character. We cannot possibly discuss the West without contemplating its myth. This thesis urges a refocus toward a more factual history, where truth and imagination are more clearly defined and their ambiguities are acknowledged.

Visually, the photographs in *True West* are images of images. Utilizing photography's ability as a representational tool, my photographs record and re-present already existing representations of western myth. Each image occurring within the camera serves as a metaphor for the representation of myth, and in turn, the misrepresentation of truth occurring both within and beyond the lens. Photography then, plays an important role in discerning this imagined West. As a purveyor of truth, the photographic image has often contributed to western mythmaking. My approach to image making is instead to upend the original intent of the photograph by focusing on the ideal rather than the factual. By making obvious the irony taking place, *True West* reflects on both the absurdity and necessity of mythmaking in the West.

Chapter 2 The Imagined West

When contemplating the seemingly collective fascination with the American West, it is impossible not to get caught up in myth. In fact, the West has become so closely tied to its myths that they have become the defining elements with which the West and its people use to brand themselves. Who can blame them? These characteristics that have come to define the West are traits that many if not all Americans reach for within themselves; notions of independence, honesty, courage, self-reliance and freedom.

This thesis centers on my curiosity in an American and possibly an international fascination with the idea of the American West more so than the actual West itself. This imagined version of the West grew simultaneously with the growth of the historic West, as the early history of the West was being reimagined before it even had the chance to play itself out. Western historian Patricia Nelson Limerick gives an example,

In 1849, Kit Carson set out to rescue a white woman, providentially named Mrs. White, who had been taken captive by the Jicarilla Apaches. When the search party caught up with the Indians, it was too late; Mrs. White had just been killed. But Kit Carson came upon a surprising souvenir: “We found a book in the camp,” he reported, “the first of the kind I had ever seen, in which I was represented as a great hero, slaying Indians by the hundreds.”¹

Here, frontiersman Kit Carson comes face to face with a literary version of himself and the literary version proves to be more heroic and resonant with the American public. The fictional Carson became the standard for the real Carson. His fictional reputation was too mythic for the real Carson to live up to. Myth was in effect altering history by becoming a part of it. We see this reshaping occurring many times throughout the history of the West. In many cases western myth became so intertwined within western history that the

¹ Patricia Nelson Limerick, “Making the Most of Words: Verbal Activity and Western America,” in *Under an Open Sky: Rethinking America’s Western Past*, ed. William J. Cronon, George Miles and Jay Gitlin (New York: W.W. Norton, 1992), 167.

two became indistinguishable from each other. These myths, these widely held misconceptions or misrepresentations of the truth,² are at the core of both my photographic and written research.

Before the United States of America even came to fruition and began defining itself as a nation, soon to be Americans were already settling further and further westward, beyond their previous boundaries and into the frontier. By 1763, thousands of hunters, trappers, traders, farmers, merchants and soldiers were moving beyond the eastern border of the Appalachians and settling throughout the trans-Appalachian region.³ By far the largest and most important driving force westward came as a result of Thomas Jefferson's acquisition of the trans-Mississippi West through the Louisiana Purchase in 1803. Jefferson then set forth with a plan for the Lewis and Clark Expedition. From 1803 to 1806, Captain Meriwether Lewis and William Clark, along with the Corps of Discovery, explored and charted America's newly acquired territory, studying the botany, geology, wildlife and terrain, in addition to establishing relations with Native American Indian tribes. While on the expedition, their reports back to Jefferson gave the promise of abundant resources and helped to lay the foundation for an American belief in Manifest Destiny and resulting westward expansion. Their encyclopedic inventory and factual accounts helped to instill Jefferson's vision in the West as America's promised land. Lewis and Clark's journals were published in 1814, romantically edited and full of fictionalized accounts, focusing national attention on this newly idealized West.⁴

² "myth, *n.*" *OED Online*, (Oxford University Press, June 2008, accessed 1 May 2009); available from <http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/00320409>; Internet.

³ Elliot West, "American Frontier," in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 115.

⁴ Charles S. Peterson, "Speaking for the Past," in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 746.

Lewis and Clark became regional heroes, evident in the monuments erected in their honor along their expedition route. These monuments to western heroes, both real and imaginary, are one of many components that bring together the visual work in *True West*. In 1806 and 1807, Lieutenant Zebulon Pike led a similar but less recognized government exploration throughout the Southwest. Pike's published documentation of his expedition drew great interest as well, championing that of the Lewis and Clark journals for its account of the Great Plains as an uninhabitable desert.⁵

Over the next 40 years, government aided scientific explorations and topographical surveys of the West were conducted, providing detailed reports of the region's diverse geology, ecology and ethnography. The focus on discovery and exploration formalized when the military created the U.S. Topographical Bureau during the War of 1812, followed by 1838's creation of the Corps of Topographical Engineers.⁶ America's fascination with recording and classifying geological, ecological and geographical discoveries reinforced the widely held opinion that with its acquisition of the West, Americans turned their attention toward the relationship between man and nature more so than any other culture had previously. This is evident in curator Sandra S. Phillips' claim that "Wilderness, not history, is what gave the New World its identity."⁷ I agree with Phillips, though it is important to emphasize that while wilderness may have been the most prominent factor in giving identity to the New World, there were many

⁵ Charles S. Peterson, *The Oxford History of the American West*, 747.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sandra S. Phillips, "To Subdue the Continent: Photographs of the Developing West," in *Crossing the Frontier: Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to Present* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 15.



Fig. 1 *Lewis & Clark Mural, Big Timber, Montana, 2009*

contributing factors that came together to form the uniquely American identity with which we still perceive ourselves today. Historian Richard White reiterates this American association with the land by stating that the landscape of the West in particular, whether perceived as a garden of peace, freedom and serenity or as a hostile frontier, beyond the

boundaries of civilization, “offered something that Europeans did not and could not possess.”⁸

German-American painter Albert Bierstadt alluded to this fascination with the landscape in his *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California* (1865). His style of painting reiterated the preexisting notions of grandeur and promise in the West and is seen as derivative of the European landscape painting and Hudson River School genres. Traditionally, these genres depicted an almost spiritual beauty within nature, though for Bierstadt, nature’s wonders seem even more raw and terrifying, while still promoting optimistically that there is promise in the setting sun’s light at the end of the valley. Brian W. Dippie states that Bierstadt’s paintings “gave Americans a western Eden just a little grander than reality.”⁹

The discovery of gold and subsequent gold rush to present day California in 1848 justified the growing interest in western grandeur, seen in not only Bierstadt’s but many other artists work. Within a year, 100,000 people moved to California in search of gold and the immigrating population grew to over 250,000 by 1852.¹⁰ The gold rush proved that there was a need for an overland trade route, where California’s riches could be shipped back East and where people and goods could in turn be carried to the Far West. From 1853 to 1855, Congress initiated four transcontinental railroad surveys, under the direction of the army, to determine the best route. Congress then decided, with overwhelming persuasion from the Central Pacific Railroad, to fund two joint railroad

⁸ Richard White, *“It’s Your Misfortune and None of My Own”: A New History of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1991), 620.

⁹ Brian W. Dippie, “The Visual West,” in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 689.

¹⁰ Clyde A. Milner II, “National Initiatives,” in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 169.

projects. One line would depart from San Francisco, California heading East and the other, under the direction of the Union Pacific Railroad, would head West from the convergence of multiple lines near the one-hundredth meridian.¹¹ As the Civil War broke in 1861, it put a halt on the federal government's interests in the West. With the end of the war, labor and supplies shifted away from military demands and back toward westering efforts. The construction of a transcontinental railroad exemplified the quest for Manifest Destiny," as it allowed America to "...overspread and possess the whole of the continent...."¹² John Gast's *American Progress* (1872) visualizes these expansionist beliefs in Manifest Destiny with its depiction of a personified Columbia bearing the "Star of Empire", leading civilization westward as Native Americans and wild animals alike flee their progress. The two rail lines finally met on May 10, 1869 in Promontory, Utah with the symbolic driving of the golden spike.¹³ The completion of this first transcontinental railroad was seen as a victory for America and a death knell for the frontier. Her labor, technology and determination had proven triumphant over the vast and often inhospitable stretches of the western landscape, laying the way for another surge of Americans heading westward.

¹¹ The end of the route for each rail line ultimately changed. Sacramento, California became the railroad's terminus in the West while Omaha, Nebraska became the route's point of departure from the East.

¹² "...overspread and possess the whole of the continent..." is excerpted from New York newspaperman John L. O'Sullivan's much longer prose in which he initially coined the term *Manifest Destiny* in 1845, before it came into popular and political use as America's divine right to conquest in a western direction across the North American continent.

¹³ Keith L. Bryant, Jr., "Entering the Global Economy," in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O'Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215-217.



Fig. 2 Albert Bierstadt, *Looking Down Yosemite Valley, California*, 1865



Fig. 3 John Gast, *American Progress*, c. 1872

The desire for land and riches is not solely what drove people westward. Western writer Wallace Stegner describes it well as he points to Henry David Thoreau, “There is another reason why the West, including Alaska, perpetuates the American dream or illusion. Americans have a centuries-old habit of dreaming westward. ‘Eastward I go only by force; but westward I go free,’ Thoreau wrote in 1862. ‘The future lies that way to me, and the earth seems more unexhausted and richer on that side.... I must walk toward Oregon, and not toward Europe.’”¹⁴ Further from Europe life became more distinctly American. Travelers headed west because westering meant freedom and independence, the cornerstones of American value. In the West, they found the courage and self-reliance that defined them as Americans more necessary here than anywhere else they had been. The perceived romance of reality became even more romantic. This could not be truer for any one individual than the cowboy. Originally known as a ‘herder,’ the cowboy was simply a hired hand on horseback. It wasn’t until the last few decades of the 1800s that the cowboy gained such a heroic presence within the American imagination. As the popularity of the mountain man lessened, there was a need for a new individualistic western hero.

The cowboy’s appeal lies in his rugged, self-reliant image and free-roaming occupation. In the 1870s, his character began to appear in literary works as rough, uncouth and violent, “at the very least a disturber of the peace and at the worst a brutal outlaw.”¹⁵ It was not until dime novelist Prentiss Ingraham immortalized a rodeo cowboy from Buffalo Bill’s Wild West show by the name of Buck Taylor that he began to take on

¹⁴ Wallace Stegner, *One Way to Spell Man* (Garden City: Doubleday, 1982), 164-165.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, 111.

the qualities of a hero.¹⁶ Then, off of the canvases of Frederic Remington and Charles M. Russell, and out of the pages of Owen Wister's *The Virginian* (1902) he flew and became the glamorous cowboy hero that we know today. These three men solidified the popularity of the cowboy for eternity, as the singular icon emblematic of the West and as a national symbol for America. But here is where fiction outlives fact. The cowboy as we have come to know and love him only really existed for a very short period of time. The cowboy historically existed from the mid 1800s through the 1880s before the use of barbed wire and the transcontinental railroad made his transient way of life nonexistent.



Fig. 4 *Grass Range, Montana, 2009*

¹⁶ Ibid.

With the closing of the frontier and the end of the open range as they knew it, the cowboy's temporality gave them their popularity. By the 1870s, a simplified version of the cowboy had become a part of the mass-marketed dime novel though it was Wister's account that created the romantic, manly cowboy as we see him. Visually, Remington's focus placed the cowboy among military heroes, involved in 'winning the West' away from Indian savages, while Russell's vision set the cowboy within the realm of nostalgia as Russell himself lamented for a West that was disappearing with history. Another example of how western myth shaped western history becomes evident in historian Martha A. Sandweiss' account of traveling portrait photographer G.D. Freeman photographing cowboys in his portable studio,

Arriving in Caldwell, Kansas, in April 1879 he [Freeman] opened a gallery and later recalled that he "did a profitable business among the 'cowboys,' who were anxious to get a photograph of themselves in 'cowboy' style to send to their friends living in the eastern states. Some of the boys would wear a large sombrero and have several revolvers hanging from a belt worn around their waist, others would be represented in leather leggings, two large Texas spurs on their boots, revolvers in hand and looking as much like a desperado as their custom and appearance would admit.

Sandweiss goes on to comment,

And indeed, such dress has more to do with the business of *acting* like a cowboy than with the business of actually *being* one. Intent upon claiming a particular kind of cultural authority and evoking a romantic image that belied the realities and practicalities of working life, nineteenth-century cowhands were more likely to wear guns inside a studio than outside it, more likely to wear chaps for the photographer than for their horse.¹⁷

These cowboys' actions perpetuated their own mythic imaginings. By acting the part for the camera, they were monumentalizing the very thing that had already brought them West in the first place, a chance to become a self-proclaimed 'man of the West' and live

¹⁷ Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 331.

the rugged, self-reliant lifestyle that they had only read about in dime novels.

Additionally, Sandweiss' example points to an important fact in the permeation of the western myth. It was not just paintings and literature that were popularizing the cowboy stereotype at the time; photography played just as important a part in contributing to his image.

Wallace Stegner proclaimed the cowboy hero as "the most imagination-catching and durable of our mythic figures."¹⁸ It is this mythic figure and his immediately distinguishable silhouette that is one of the centerpieces of my photographic work. The cowboy image has become a sort of calling card for the West appearing on everything from billboards to cigarette advertisements to the tourist's choice of attire. His meaning still resonates today as it did at the end of the nineteenth-century, serving as an elegy to an imagined past.

Around the same time that Remington and Russell were brushing the mythic cowboy hero onto their canvases, William "Buffalo Bill" Cody was turning the western myth into commercial entertainment by bringing the West directly to the American public. Ned Buntline's long running series of wildly successful dime novels starring Cody as a frontier scout had already made him a well known name by the time the "Wild West, Rocky Mountain, and Prairie Exhibition" originated in 1883.¹⁹ Wanting to capitalize on his dime novel fame and live up to the role in which Buntline had written him, Cody began touring eastern cities, participating in dramatizations of dime novels and reenactments of actual events from western history. This eventually led to his

¹⁸ Wallace Stegner, *One Way to Spell Man*, 109.

¹⁹ Buntline, whose real name was Edward C. Z. Judson, first wrote about Buffalo Bill in *Buffalo Bill, King of the Bordermen* (1869). Cody's character, "the greatest scout of the west," was known for his wilderness survival, Indian fighting, and vigilante justice.

creation of the internationally successful “Buffalo Bill’s Wild West and Congress of Rough Riders of the World” in all its iterations. These shows were full of spectacle and sensationalism, specializing in events that were uniquely western. Performances ranged from King of the Cowboys Buck Taylor riding bucking broncos and sharpshooter Annie Oakley using her rifle to burst glass balls and pierce three by five inch cards embossed with her picture, to Native Americans, mostly Sioux, performing dances and showing life as it had been on the prairie before westward expansion. Highlights included reenactments of hunters chasing buffalo, Indians attacking the Deadwood stagecoach, the Pony Express delivering mail to isolated frontier outposts and even a recreation of the defeat of General George A. Custer at Little Bighorn. The finale came when Cody, viewed as the epitome of an American cowboy, led a galloping victory lap of all the shows participants with the American flag waving proudly among them.²⁰

For many viewers, Buffalo Bill had brought them as true a West as they had ever known. Cody advertised his show as a portrayal of “actual scenes, genuine characters” and for many it was just that. Cody and his Wild West show was the closest they came to a living embodiment of western myth. His ability to capitalize on myth, both his own and that of the West in general, attests to the stereotyping with which the entire world perceived the American West.

²⁰ Robert V. Hine and John Mack Faragher, *The American West: A New Interpretive History* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2000), 501-502; Anne M. Butler, “Selling the Popular Myth,” in *The Oxford History of the American West*, ed. Clyde A. Milner II, Carol A. O’Connor and Martha A. Sandweiss (New York: Oxford University Press, 1994), 779-781.



Fig. 5 Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show advertisement poster, c. 1899



Fig. 6 Film Still from John Ford's *Stagecoach*, 1939

As the popularity of Buffalo Bill's Wild West show began to die out, the birth of an entirely new interpretation of the West captivated the American imagination. *The Great Train Robbery* (1903) simultaneously created the beginning of the American motion picture industry and the uniquely American western film genre. For the next sixty years, at least a third of all American films were westerns. Furthermore, by 1959, seven of the top ten shows on national television were also westerns.²¹ It was an easy transition from Wild West shows and dime novels to cinema. The first western plotlines seemed plucked almost directly from the traveling show's theatrics or the dime novel's predictable narratives as they were adapted for the camera.²² Even Tom Mix, one of the earliest successful western actors, came to cinema as a veteran of the Wild West show, where he became a master of trick riding and fancy shooting. In an effort to make films seem even more authentic, some early westerns included rodeo cowboys and ranch hands wrangling horses, performing stunts, or portraying cinematic outlaw gangs and vigilante posses.²³ But here is where the authenticity pretty much stopped. Though filmmakers may have been using authentic actors, the monumentalized characters, formulaic plotlines, and Bierstadtian locations were in no way authentic. Regardless, this perceived authenticity propelled the western film's immense success among viewers.

As stated, a major key to the success of the western lies in its most common character, the cowboy. Western movies, following Remington, Russell and Wister in their stereotypical portrayals of the western hero, became the primary source for

²¹ Robert V. Hine, *The American West: A New Interpretive History*, 503; Anne M. Butler, *The Oxford History of the American West*, 791.

²² *The Great Train Robbery* is a prime example of this. Later on in the life of Buffalo Bill's Wild West shows, one of the highlight performances included a train hold-up.

²³ Robert V. Hine, *The American West: A New Interpretive History*, 503-504.

twentieth-century images of American manhood.²⁴ Tom Mix, Gary Cooper, and John Wayne all played cowboys distinctly tied to their roots as men of the West, but it was Wayne who took it a step further, blurring the line between his character onscreen and real life. Wayne's very American and very masculine persona typified what it meant to be a cowboy. As the western film genre became a defining element of American popular culture, simultaneous to Wayne's cinematic success, real westerners were once again modeling themselves after fictional characters. Their true West was an imagined West, as they had known it almost exclusively through film.²⁵ As is evident in my photographic work, the western film genre remains one of the factors with which contemporary western myth is so closely rooted.

Throughout the history of the West, myth has demanded such presence that it has become more important than history itself. The imagined West has become rooted in the American collective conscious as if it were the authentic West. Rather than each aspect of the West exhibiting its own unique cultural identity, we have defined and in many ways simplified it down to nothing but its stereotypes. *True West* questions, when we as Americans have a history so intertwined with myth, how does this affect American culture and the way we think about ourselves? Richard White claims, "a myth about the West is a story that explains who westerners – and who Americans – are and how they should act."²⁶ Thus, should myth be taken as truth or simply a way to enrich an already monumental history? *True West* is meant to encourage a greater recognition of the

²⁴ Ibid., 506.

²⁵ Worth noting here is the excerpt about New Yorker journalist Jane Kramer's article on a Texas ranch foreman titled *The Last Cowboy*. Speaking of the "cowboy", Richard White states, "His own sense of himself, and how he acted, were informed not just by the West he lived in but also by a powerful cultural image of the West he *should* have lived in." Richard White, "*It's Your Misfortune and None of My Own*": *A New History of the American West*, 614.

²⁶ Ibid., 615.

differences between an imagined West and actual West. It calls for a refocus toward a more factual history, with an understanding that while these myths lay the foundation for a modern sense of American identity, they should not be interpreted as history.



Fig. 7 *John Wayne Tribute Van*,
Birthplace of Marion Robert Morrison, Winterset, Iowa, 2009

Chapter 3 Photography's Contribution to the Developing Western Image

The photographic image and the West came of age together. In the 1840s and 1850s, photography joined into American culture at a time when there were already many other well-accepted forms of visual representation. As the popularity of photography grew, it was only a short time before photographers started pointing their cameras toward the West. Though the immergence of this new medium would not immediately contribute to the ideas that had such a strong hold on the American imagination. Paintings and illustrations were already popular means of conveying the idealized image of the West and the photograph's inherent nature to be taken as evidence or truth hindered its contribution to western romanticization. Americans were conflicted about the true value of the western photograph. While it gave its eastern audience a truthful portrayal of the West's unfamiliar places and people, the photographic image fell short of providing the same drama and excitement that the public had grown accustomed to in the West's mythic paintings, illustrations, novels and Wild West shows. Photography instead, had to evolve to encompass America's preexisting visions of the West, setting aside precision for imagination and artifice.²⁷ Photographic truth is then an interesting concept to ponder, given the history of photography's close relationship with the history of the American West.

By the time photography had been invented in 1839, Lewis and Clark had already led the first American expedition westward and Americans were just beginning to settle

²⁷ Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002), 10-13.

in the trans-Mississippi West.²⁸ A renewed interest in western territories after the Civil War allowed for four federally funded major surveys of the interior West from 1867 to 1879. Each survey expedition employed scientists, topographical surveyors, painters, illustrators and photographers. The evolution of photographic technology from daguerreotypes to wet-plate processes provided a new opportunity for photography to be utilized as a part of the survey efforts. The wet-plate process's ability to record visual information on a negative, that could then be reproduced in large numbers and distributed to a varied audience, made the photographer's presence on the expeditions essential, recording a natural world that most Americans had not seen. Photography gave these expeditions an 'accurate record' of the western landscapes they were surveying, though the images themselves in many cases were carefully constructed to adhere to and perpetuate romanticized ideas.²⁹ Large format photographs made out in the field were then used in the survey's scientific reports. Combining text with image became a useful way to propel the survey's efforts into a more public eye. The survey expeditions, through these reports, told stories of a new western world that had yet to unfold. What the expeditions did not realize is that in doing so, they were alluding to a western world "that could *be* only through the disappearance of a West that *was*."³⁰ In addition to publication in reports, the survey photographers publicized their work through the distribution of stereo cards. These stereo cards became popular in both schools and among the general public as parlor entertainment. The ability for a general audience to view these

²⁸ This makes me wonder how the earliest expeditions westward would have changed were a photographer a part of their crew. Would Lewis and Clark have come back with a completely different record of the West if the advent of the photographic medium had been 50 years earlier?

²⁹ Eva Respini, "Discoverers, Dreamers, and Drifters" in *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2009), 11.

³⁰ Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*, 13.

monumental depictions of the West, especially in the stereo format, reinforced the West as a picturesque destination within the collective imagination.³¹

William Henry Jackson is probably the best-known photographer to contribute to the survey efforts. As a part of Ferdinand V. Hayden's team, Jackson and landscape painter Thomas Moran traveled throughout the West, from the badlands of Wyoming to the cliff dwellings of Arizona and New Mexico. Jackson's initial impulse was to create a more prosaic record of the western landscape, though as he and Moran became friends, Moran taught him "the artifice of picturesque and sublime composition." Susan S. Phillips goes on to mention that under Moran's guidance, "Jackson was transformed from a very good topographic photographer to one who learned and adapted the aesthetic lessons of landscape painting."³² These two artists took the preconceptions, myths and desires of eastern audiences and put those same ideals into their survey work, though for Jackson, his imagined West gained an even greater actuality as a result of photography's supposed authenticity. We can see this change in Jackson's approach to imagemaking in a comparison of an early image from the Hayden survey, *Yellowstone River above the Falls* (1871), and the well-known *Grand Canyon of the Colorado River* (1883). With the former, though there are notions of the picturesque in such a pristine landscape, Jackson's reproduction of the scene is not idealized.³³ The later, on the other hand, created after the Hayden survey's completion, embodies the optimism of Manifest Destiny while romanticizing the survey period as a heroic age of exploration. Curator Eva Respini

³¹ Sandra S. Phillips, "To Subdue the Continent: Photographs of the Developing West," in *Crossing the Frontier: Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to Present* (San Francisco: San Francisco Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 23.

³² Ibid., 26.

³³ Worth noting is that the use of images like these, along with Moran's watercolors of the region, helped to convince Congress to protect the Yellowstone area from frontier settlement and instead set it aside for preservation and public use as America's first national park in 1872.



Fig. 8 William Henry Jackson, *Yellowstone River above the Falls*, 1871



Fig. 9 William Henry Jackson,
Grand Canyon of the Colorado River, 1883

describes *Grand Canyon of the Colorado River* as a “nostalgic reenactment of the survey spirit.”³⁴ Sold to tourists, it was with images like these that photography began to play a large part in contributing to America’s image of the West.

At the same time that William Henry Jackson was working for the Hayden survey, Timothy O’Sullivan, who trained with Mathew Brady as a Civil War photographer, was employed by both Clarence King’s and George Wheeler’s topographical surveys. O’Sullivan’s approach to documenting the West initially seems much more scientific, as in *Inscription Rock* (1872). Though upon closer inspection, the whole of O’Sullivan’s western imagery points to the vast, arid western landscape as if emphasizing the insignificance of the human figure, to an extent that imposes terror.³⁵ O’Sullivan’s portrayal of the West’s immensity can be seen in both *Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle* from *Geographical and Geological Explorations and Surveys West of the 100th Meridian* (1873) and in the now infamous *Desert Sand Hills near Sink of Carson, Nevada* (1867). With *Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle*, O’Sullivan depicts the ancient cliff dwellings true to reality, though through composition, they seem overpowered by the massive rock face. *Desert Sand Hills near Sink of Carson, Nevada* is a prime example of how O’Sullivan seems to underscore human insignificance. With his horse drawn darkroom in the distance, the imposing sand hill almost swallows the photographer’s presence. O’Sullivan’s photographs came to perpetuate an image of the West as historically, geographically, and geologically rich yet wild and uninhabitable.³⁶

³⁴ Eva Respini, *Into the Sunset: Photography’s Image of the American West*, 12.

³⁵ Sandra S. Phillips, *Crossing the Frontier: Photographs of the Developing West, 1849 to Present*, 24.

³⁶ Eva Respini, *Into the Sunset: Photography’s Image of the American West*, 12.

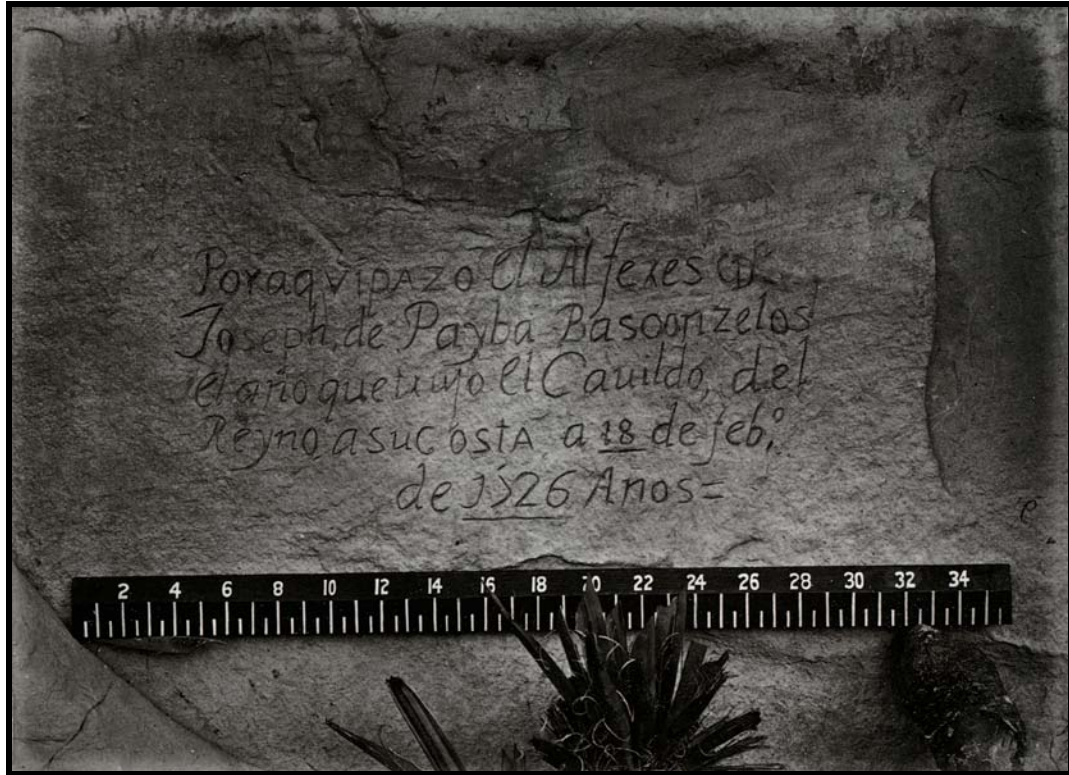


Fig. 10 Timothy O'Sullivan, *Inscription Rock*, 1872

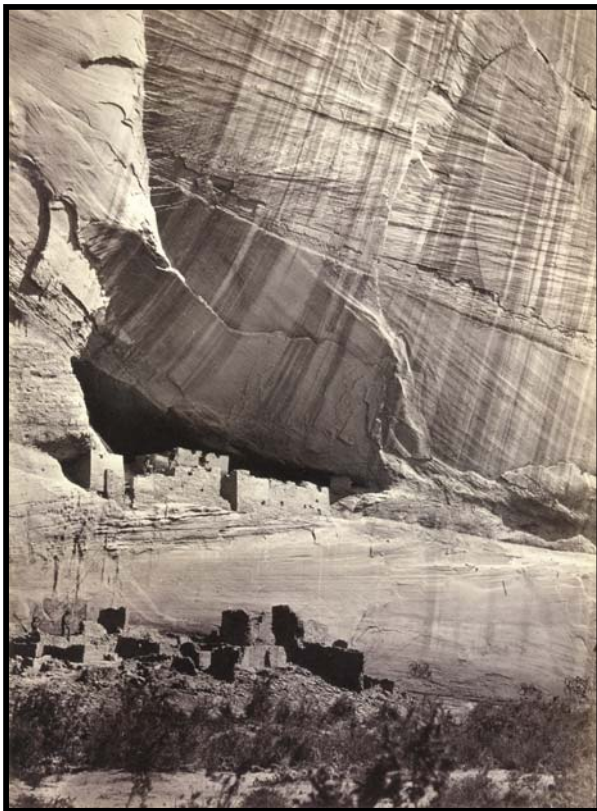


Fig. 11 Timothy O'Sullivan, *Ancient Ruins in the Cañon de Chelle*, from *Geographical and Geological Explorations and Surveys West of the 100th Meridian*, 1873



Fig. 12 Timothy O'Sullivan, *Desert Sand Hills near Sink of Carson, Nevada*, 1867

As a result, Jackson and O'Sullivan's straightforward though nevertheless awe-inducing aesthetic with which they depicted the West laid the foundation for future generations of American landscape photographers.

Though the surveys played a large part in photography's contribution to the myth of the West, documenting the landscape was not the only way that photography came into use. Photography's initial popularity as a form of portraiture gained even more interest as the population spread from coast to coast. Americans were fascinated with the image's uncanny ability to record a specific moment in a person's life and portrait studios popped up in every major town across the nation. Everyone wanted to have their photograph taken and with the reproducibility of the glass negative's new technology, the photograph became a way to keep in touch with friends and relatives on the opposite coast.

In the West, photography was used to document progress and prosperity, and inherently, it began to perpetuate the already established mythic stereotypes. Traveling photographers set up their cameras along the wagon trails, documenting settlers surviving self-sufficiently in the middle of the seemingly inhospitable interior West. After the gold rush to California, successful miners entered the newly emerging photography studios, wanting to have a visual record of their newfound prosperity in the West. These miners stood before the camera holding their tools of the trade and more often, the fruits of their hard labor, golden nuggets. Eva Respini elaborates, “The miners’ poses, their outfits, and the tools that define their hazardous occupation have contributed to the rough-and-tumble hero persona that is prevalent in the legends of the West.”³⁷ Similarly, when frontiersmen entered the studio, they chose to pose in their fringed buckskin suits, with gun in hand. As photography’s immense popularity grew, image after image of the West’s characters continued to exalt its’ heroic subjects, perpetuating their mythic archetypes that have endured within our collective conscious to this day.

For the cowboy persona, his depiction became the most enduring of all. As Martha Sandweiss has alluded, photography and myth came together to inform reality most prominently for the cowboy. These western heroes acted the part for the camera to the utmost, with their wide-brimmed hats, leather chaps, spurs and revolvers blazing, and in doing so, monumentalized their own romantic existence. The resulting images perpetuated a glamorous lifestyle that was in reality far from the truth. Sandweiss explains that even early on, these photographs of cowboys “were invested with the power of myth and cloaked in the gauzy haze of nostalgia; they evoked a longing for the past

³⁷ Eva Respini, *Into the Sunset: Photography’s Image of the American West*, 22.

rather than an understanding of the present.”³⁸ As a result, the western portrait fell prey to the same pitfalls that the western landscape genre had suffered from in depicting an accurate record of the early West.



Fig. 13 Charles D. Kirkland,
Wyoming Cow-boy, c. 1877-95

³⁸ Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*, 330.

Additionally, portraiture became an important, though now sobering, tool for recording what were believed to be vanishing cultures, due to the displacement of local peoples and a growing American population throughout the West. Even before the advent of photography, painter George Catlin set out to depict the West's 'noble savages' more as an ethnographer than artist. Catlin's illustrations and paintings, created throughout the 1830s, show a sensitivity toward a more ethical depiction than the photographs that would soon follow.³⁹ Established in 1879, the Bureau of Ethnology was created by Congress in order to study America's indigenous cultures. In a similar approach to that of the topographical surveys, these ethnographic expeditions relied heavily on the photographic record as an accompaniment to their ethnographic, archeological and linguistic field research. The photographs, rarely straightforward in their portrayals, adhered to the bureau's mission by reflecting a popular nostalgia for the Native American cultures that had previously been and still were being deliberately destroyed.⁴⁰ Problematic in their approach, these early photographs of 'vanishing cultures' were predominantly if not exclusively taken by white photographers and reflected the romanticized notions of Native Americans as western icons.

Edward Sheriff Curtis became one of the most notable photographers to depict Native Americans, famous for playing upon the nostalgia that Eastern audiences had for the 'vanishing Indian race.' Intent upon creating a comprehensive record of Native Americans, Curtis anthropologically documented as many various tribes as possible, both photographically and through the study of their oral histories, language, customs and music, later organized in a multivolume set titled *The Native American Indian*. Curtis's

³⁹ William H. Goetzmann, "George Catlin: Saving the Memory of a Vanishing Race," in *The West of the Imagination* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 1986), chap. 2 passim.

⁴⁰ Eva Respini, *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West*, 20-21.

work has caused an enormous amount of controversy, because of its sympathetic depiction of Native Americans as inferior noble savages and beliefs that the photographs constructed a specific opinion of Indian culture, from a white perspective rather than truthfully recorded their history. Curtis is known to have taken liberties posing his subjects in staged reenactments and removing contemporary items of material culture so that the images would further adhere to the Indian stereotype. There were even times when Native Americans from one tribe would be paid to wear historically inaccurate clothing, with the resulting photograph intentionally mislabeled as a document of another tribes culture.⁴¹ The popularity of Curtis's work in addition to the popularity of the various other 'ethnological' representations being created, is important to consider when contemplating the authenticity of depictions of not only Native Americans, but all early westerners.

Given the precedence that the early years of photography placed on the West of the imagination, we can see how easily fabrication became interpreted as reality. When the majority of our depictions of the West originated out of myth, how could western stereotypes not become the norm? By the time Frederick Jackson Turner published his seminal essay, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History* in 1893, the very character he described as the ideal American existed almost exclusively within the imagination of the American public, as did the wild landscape these ideal Americans were so apt at 'taming'. The frontier itself, "the meeting point between savagery and civilization,"⁴² existed only in the nostalgic memories of a time passed. Regardless, the

⁴¹ Eva Respini, *Into the Sunset: Photography's Image of the American West*, 21; Martha A. Sandweiss, *Print the Legend: Photography and the American West*, 270.

⁴² Frederick Jackson Turner, *The Significance of the Frontier in American History*, March of America Facsimile Series (Ann Arbor: University Microfilms, 1966), 200.

West's legendary status would endure. Photography, as the ideal purveyor of myth, simply helped to perpetuate these beliefs to today, laying the foundation upon which contemporary representations of the West could be built.

Chapter 4 The Contemporary West

My photographic thesis, *True West*, calls into question the seeming American fascination with the American West. The current state of the West is one where history has become intertwined with myth, where each influences the other, and where more often than not, myth prevails. This thesis is an attempt to understand how we interpret history when authenticity is difficult to distinguish from fabrication. In doing so, my work is meant to encourage a refocus toward a more factual history. My photographs question authenticity, and ask where we draw the line between myth and fact.

Throughout the development of this body of work, I've become extremely interested in the ways that the myth of the West presents itself as the tourist's destination, the artist's canvas, the cigarette company's advertising campaign, and the filmmaker's plotline and in doing so become reality.

The photographs in *True West* are images of images. Rather than depict majestic landscapes impacted by human development, as some of the *New Topographics* era of photographers so clearly laid out, or the West's variety of interesting characters, as in Richard Avedon's *In the American West*, I've utilized photography's ability as a representational tool to record and re-present already existing representations of western myth. Each image serves as a metaphor for the representation of myth, and in turn, the misrepresentation of truth occurring both within and beyond the lens. My choice to utilize the photographic medium is important then, when discerning this imagined West. As a purveyor of truth, the photographic image has often contributed to western mythmaking. My approach has been to upend the original intent of the photograph with respect to the West, by focusing on the ideal rather than the factual. By making obvious the irony

taking place, *True West* reflects on both the absurdity and necessity of mythmaking in the West.

Additionally, this thesis is an attempt to discover why it is that the West has such a strong hold on the American imagination. In the world's eyes, the American West exemplifies the standards that make America what it is today; independence, honesty, self-reliance, courage, justice and a love of freedom. Through the permeation of the western myth, it seems that we too have situated the West at the heart of our American identity; it embodies what we as Americans want to believe about ourselves and our national character. This seems problematic though, given that our history has become so intricately intertwined with myth. For example, in *U.S. Army Memorial on Last Stand Hill*, I've chosen to focus on this historical monument to General George Armstrong Custer and his fallen soldiers. While the obelisk does in some ways signify the battle won by the Sioux, Cheyenne and Arapaho warriors, it still seems almost inappropriate to me that this monument, erected in 1881, even exists. It stands as a testament to the many U.S. Army soldiers who lost their lives but neglects what I find more important, thousands of Native Americans were removed from their sacred lands as a result of America's westward expansion across the continent. There is instead a smaller, less-recognized Indian Memorial that was not erected until 1991 and is set aside from this central marker. This undertone of Native American historical insignificance is reiterated throughout the battlefield, which interestingly enough, sits partially within the Crow Indian Reservation. As a result of this epic battle, both General Custer and Lakota Sioux holy man Sitting Bull continue to be considered mythic icons in the West. In my photograph, the sprinklers are going off, preserving the fertile ground where so much

blood was shed, seems to make this scene even more poetic and ironically appropriate, given the almost Bierstadtian sky unfolding in the distance. It is with situations like this that have lead to our bending of historical truth, by favoring interpretation over authenticity in order to make our American history more appealing.



Fig. 14 *U.S. Army Memorial on Last Stand Hill, Little Bighorn Battlefield National Monument, Montana, 2009*

Robert Frank photographed throughout the United States during 1955 and 1956 with the aid of a Guggenheim Foundation grant, capturing the essence of American life mid-century. The resulting publication, *The Americans*, was first published in France in 1958 and a year later in the United States, redefining the icons of American culture. Frank's photographs reveal an America wrought with racism and corrupt politicians, and point to our then growing fascination with consumer culture and the open road. This anti-American perspective was initially criticized but later helped America to see itself more clearly.⁴³ Today, Frank's influence on the photographic world is seen as revolutionary, *The Americans* has been embraced with a cult-like following.

Given my approach to photographing the current state of the West, it is important to recognize my work as a descendant of Robert Frank's *The Americans*. Frank's antiestablishment view of America, taken from an outsider's perspective, became important when considering my own dissection of the popular western myth. In searching for the ties between American identity and our fascination with the West, I chose to investigate the western stereotypes that have saturated our collective consciousness, in a similar way to Frank's focus on Cold War era American undertones as indicators of American identity. Looking at *The Americans*, two of Frank's selected eighty-three images interestingly enough speak distinctly to this idea of the cowboy as being an important aspect of American culture, *Rodeo-New York City* (1954), and *Rodeo-Detroit* (1955). What is extremely interesting is that neither of these images were taken in the West, one in Detroit and one in New York City, and both with the sub-caption "rodeo."

⁴³ Jonathan Green "The Americans: Politics and Alienation" in *American Photography: A Critical History 1945 to the Present* (New York: Abrams, 1984), chap. 5 passim; National Gallery of Art, *Looking In: Robert Frank's The Americans* (Washington, D.C.: National Gallery of Art, 2009, accessed 28 October 2009); available from <http://www.nga.gov/exhibitions/2009/frank/index.shtm>; Internet.



Fig. 15 Robert Frank,
Rodeo-New York City, 1954



Fig. 16 Robert Frank, *Rodeo-Detroit*, 1955

The cowboy in *Rodeo-New York City*, specifically because of his posture, seems to have almost attained celebrity status for Frank. Additionally, in Jack Kerouac's introductory essay to *The Americans*, Kerouac references the cowboy archetype three times, and most prominently in the last stanzas of the essay. Using the uniquely American western film genre to prod at the collective American fascination with the West, Kerouac writes, "Anybody doesnt [sic.] like these pitchers dont like potry, see? Anybody dont like potry go home see Television shots of big hatted cowboys being tolerated by kind horses."⁴⁴ It is as if this cowboy image, for both Frank and Kerouac, has saturated their collective imagination. In their eyes, the cowboy's stereotype has become a part of what defines America, just as definitively as America's mid-century fascination with the open road.

Aunt Dot's Paint by Number plays upon similar stereotypes within the collective conscious. In the image, a kitsch recreation of a stereotypical western landscape has been painted in vibrant pastels, hung in a simple wooden frame and placed within a guest bedroom in my Great Aunt's house. The floral wallpaper subtly offers an additional interpretation of the natural world, a combination of Victorian and Mid-American elegance.⁴⁵ The scene itself, with the way the light entered the room on that day I took the photograph, invokes an emotional desire to be surrounded by such an immense western landscape, a feeling that most Americans have with regard to open space throughout the West. *Aunt Dot's Paint by Number* also speaks to ideas of representation

⁴⁴Robert Frank, *The Americans*, with an introduction by Jack Kerouac (New York: Grove, 1959; reprint, Washington: Steidl/National Gallery of Art, 2008).

⁴⁵ The painting itself was completed many years ago by my great grandfather. My Aunt lived in the small town of Dewey, Oklahoma, a town that my family has a long history in. The road that is now Main Street used to be known as Toalson Road where my ancestors ran a dairy and lumber business. After she died in May of 2009, only months after I took the photograph, the house that she lived in, which was previously owned by my great grandparents was sold. Looking back, the experience of photographing the painting speaks of a very personal nostalgia.

and specifically photography's ability to be used as a representational tool. *True West* pushes the boundaries of an authentic experience, utilizing multiple layers of removal and meaning, as a metaphor for our separation from an authentic West as we envision it. My photograph alludes to this by re-presenting a kitsch depiction of the western landscape, rather than directly approaching an actual landscape in the West. The misrepresentation of landscape in the painting becomes vitally important, as it provides another layer of obstruction, keeping the viewer from a truthful interpretation of the West.



Fig. 17 *Aunt Dot's Paint by Number*,
Dewey, Oklahoma, 2008



Fig. 18 Stephen Shore,
US 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon, July 21, 1973

The most influential single photograph that spurred my initial investigation into representation and then photographic re-presentation was Stephen Shore's *US 97, South of Klamath Falls, Oregon* (1973). Rather than reiterating Timothy O'Sullivan or William Henry Jackson's majestic perspective of the landscape, Shore's image denies romantic notions and instead plays upon the irony of an authentic natural experience. Similarly, the billboard in *Stanford, Montana* became a useful representational tool with which I could deconstruct the branding of the western image. What stands out within the photograph is the power of the cowboy silhouette. His wide brimmed hat is instantly recognizable as an indicator of the West, in the same way that the Statue of Liberty serves as a symbol of American independence and freedom. Both prior to and during the first decades of the

advent of photography, the silhouette in profile still served as a prominent mode of portraiture. With the perspective turned to view the subject directly from behind, as in the billboard's depiction, a silhouette becomes generalized and unidentifiable. This cowboy's anonymity reinforces his silhouette's success as a permeating symbol of the West, and a potential symbol for the whole of America. Any distinguishable features we discern from the billboard profile are a semblance equivalent to a western hero on horseback, something instantly recognizable within the American imagination.



Fig. 19 *Stanford, Montana, 2008*

Lisa Saltzman's discussion of the shadow, silhouette and specter is justification for the silhouette's strength as a representational tool. Saltzman states that the use of the silhouette within contemporary culture allows us to engage with a representation that is "at once absent yet present, schematized yet utterly recognizable, neither fully visualized nor materialized, but nonetheless, legible."⁴⁶ Based on this assessment, though a billboard's silhouettes are often quite generalized depictions, this particular billboard's western signifiers are powerful enough to communicate the cowboy's heroic status within our culture. Important to note is that the cowboy silhouette's strength is derived from it being a representation conjured from imagination, rather than the silhouette's more common historical usage as an indexical trace of the real. The silhouette itself is a product of stereotype.

In pointing to these misrepresentations of the western image within our imagination, my approach has been to utilize irony to show both the absurdity and necessity of mythmaking in the West. This paradox became a significant component within *True West*, especially when considering the fabrication of western heroes that helped to propel the western myth. As I searched for some indication of authenticity with regard to these western heroes, I began to visit the birthplaces and gravesites of the men who portrayed these legends within the uniquely American western film genre. Much of my photographic work centers on John Wayne and his infamous masculine cowboy persona. What became vitally important was that the persona of John Wayne himself was as fabricated as the cowboys he portrayed on screen. Wayne's given name was Marion Robert Morrison, it changed to John Wayne only after he started pursuing an acting

⁴⁶ Lisa Saltzman, *Making Memory Matter: Strategies of Remembrance in Contemporary Art* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2006), 53.

career, I imagine because Marion didn't sound very manly. Regardless, Wayne came to epitomize rugged masculinity and patriotism through his various roles, in addition to becoming an enduring American icon.

Throughout my research, I've realized that the western film genre's depiction of the imagined West is probably the most influential today; thus, a large part of *True West* focuses specifically on the influence of this genre.⁴⁷ The western genre's saturation within our culture determined not only the heroes I sought to photograph, but moreover the locations I traveled to when looking for the existence of western myth. Filmmaker John Ford became famous for using Monument Valley on the Arizona-Utah border as a backdrop in many of his epic western films, probably most notably in *Stagecoach* (1939) and *The Searchers* (1956). Even today, Monument Valley remains a prominent destination for any western film enthusiast. *John Ford's Point, Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park* brings together the historical precedence and contemporary fascination that western film has placed on the region. I envision this tourist, dressed in America's national costume,⁴⁸ to be making an almost religious pilgrimage to this place, a location he had probably been fascinated with ever since he began watching serial westerns on television as a kid. *John Ford's Point* also references the way we photograph the West as a result of how tourism and popular culture have branded the region as a place full of dude ranches and nature's wonders. In reality, the landscape of Monument Valley is so unique to the West that it should not have played such a defining role in John Ford's

⁴⁷ Personally, some of my first recollections of the West came through watching old westerns with my dad, particularly the epic novel and television miniseries *Lonesome Dove*, written by Larry McMurtry.

⁴⁸ For further discussion of the cowboy's attire as America's national costume, see Marianne Wiggins "Purely American," in *Still: Cowboys at the Start of the Twenty-First Century*, by Robb Kendrick (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2008), 9.



Fig. 20 *John Ford's Point*,
Monument Valley Navajo Tribal Park, Arizona, 2009

films and become the standard western backdrop in the nation's eyes. Interestingly enough, the landscape in *John Ford's Point* is remarkably reminiscent of the kitsch paint by number that hung in my Great Aunt's home.

Of note is contemporary artist Richard Prince, who confronts popular culture constantly within his own artistic practice. The majority of Prince's work calls attention to the idiosyncrasies of American culture and with Prince's series entitled *Cowboys*, he comments on the cowboy stigma by appropriating and rephotographing Marlboro

cigarette advertisements in which cowboys have been resurrected as idolized figures of American masculinity.⁴⁹ This series removes the archetypes from their original context within the commercial realm by cropping out the advertisements' original text and enlarging the overwhelmingly idealized western scenes, questioning the authenticity of the cowboy hero in general and, more specifically, the ways that media has capitalized on their nonexistent reality.⁵⁰ In the same way that generations of artists before had done, *Untitled (Cowboy)* from 2003 evokes a romantic feeling of nostalgia for the cowboy's hard working way of life.

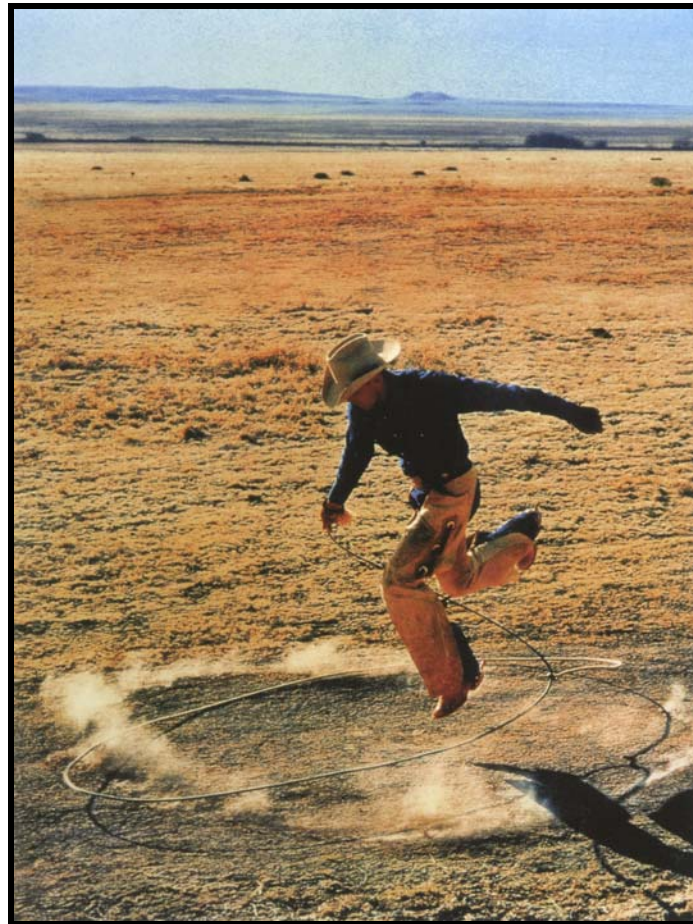


Fig. 21 Richard Prince, *Untitled (Cowboy)*, 2003

⁴⁹ If we look back to the two photographs by Robert Frank (and there are endless other examples), to be a true cowboy hero, you have to be a smoker, just as the Marlboro advertisements wanted us to believe.

⁵⁰ John Howell, "Richard Prince: Spiritual America," *Aperture* No. 190 (Spring 2008), 10-11.

Prince's work has also been influential as an example of the way in which photography plays a role in representation and then re-presentation to indicate significance. In Prince's appropriations, as in much of the work discussed thus far, irony plays a key role. Looking back at Robert Frank's *The Americans*, it appears that there is always an underlying sense of irony in the way that Frank juxtaposes elements within each composition, contributing immensely to the success of his photographs. This method of juxtaposition is again reiterated through Frank's decision to be very deliberate about the sequencing and display of the photographs, either to suggest a narrative or to complicate the relationship between specific sets of images. Stephen Shore used irony quite obviously in *US 97*, denying the viewer any sort of authenticity, a strategy that I too have attempted to implement within my own approach to imagemaking.

Consideration for the ways in which language has been used became just as important as considering visual depictions when discerning this imagined West. The very title of this body of work, *True West*, alludes to the irony within the contemporary West's status. By pointing my camera toward representations, I am both capturing and falling short of finding a true West. Each image is authentic in that what appears before the lens is really there, however, the subject itself is fictionalized. The resulting photographs question how we separate truth from fabrication when nearly every representation contains some facet of inaccuracy. Furthermore, the photographs in *True West* that rely heavily on text within the image are partially meant to reference how the written word has contributed just as much as the visual record to the West of the imagination. It became important to consider how very specific word choice can bring about nostalgic feelings for a specific moment in our past, or how an actor's name can be enough to

evoke visions of a western hero. This was my intention with my photograph *John Wayne's Hollywood Star Replica*. The only referent to the West in the photograph is the suggestion of John Wayne's persona, which is forever linked to the cowboy archetype he so often portrayed. Additionally, it seemed appropriate metaphorically to photograph a replica of the Hollywood star rather than the actual star in Los Angeles, as a further allusion to our separation from western authenticity.

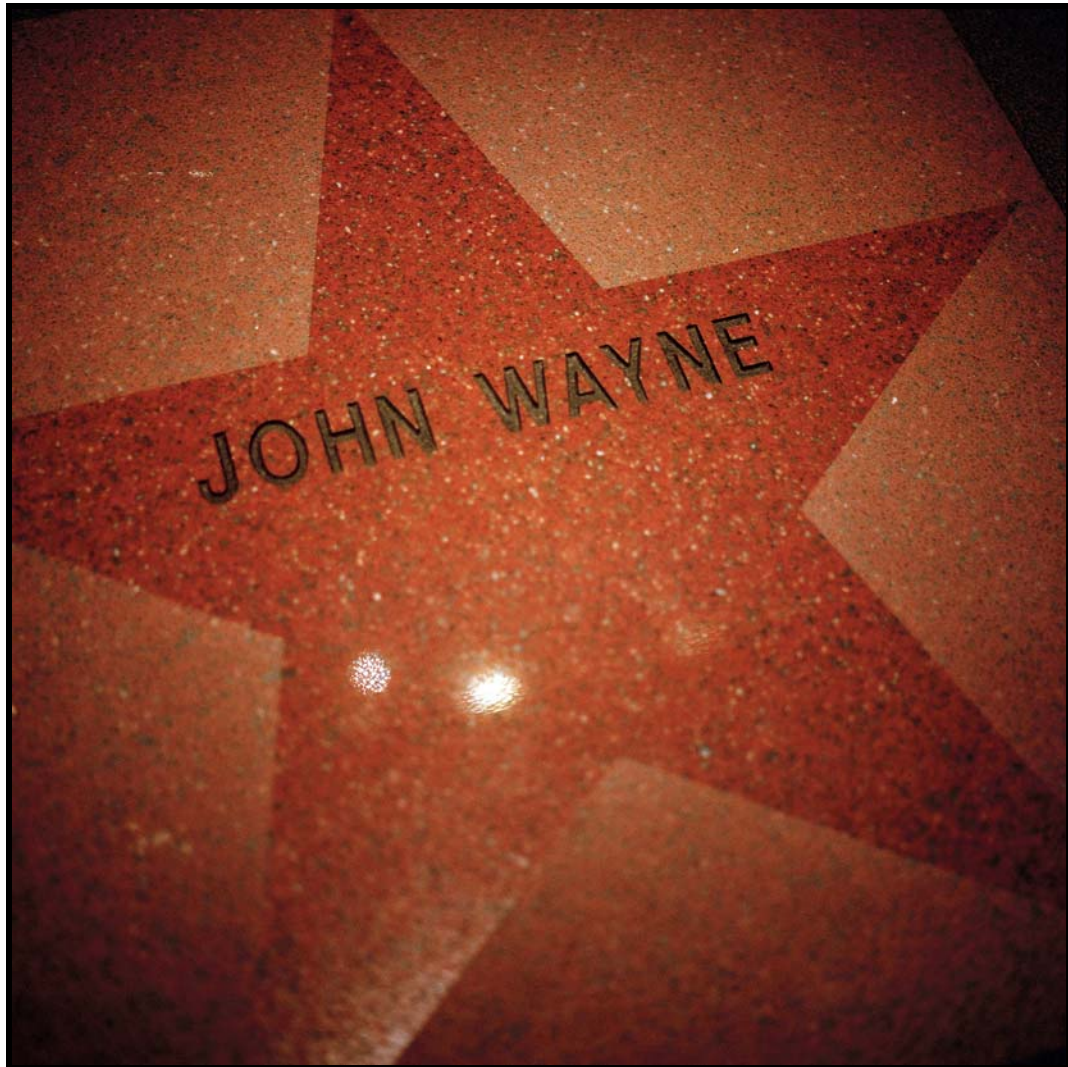


Fig. 22 *John Wayne's Hollywood Star Replica*,
National Cowboy & Western Heritage Museum,
Oklahoma City, Oklahoma, 2009

My decision to use photography as a means of questioning the West's contemporary status is important to note, given photography's contribution to the blurring of history and myth, and the supposed truth of the photographic image. How do we understand history, and in turn, understand what makes us, as Americans, who we are, when history and myth are so intricately intertwined? *True West* urges a greater awareness and distinction of the subtleties within our complex past. In looking at the contemporary West, my photographs aim to point to the historical precedence photography and our culture at large has placed on the imagined West, a precedence that problematizes our American identity to this day. Through my re-presentation of these misrepresentations, *True West* challenges the original intent of the photograph. Roland Barthes describes the photograph as authentication itself,⁵¹ though when what the photograph presents is rooted in the imagination rather than that which is real, does authenticity still exist? Barthes explains,

Perhaps we have an invincible resistance to believing in the past, in History, except in the form of myth. The Photograph, for the first time, puts an end to this resistance: henceforth the past is as certain as the present, what we see on paper is as certain as what we touch. It is the advent of the Photograph – and not, as has been said, of the cinema – which divides the history of the world.⁵²

Here, Barthes confirms that photographs validate history. Though myths do not rely on the photograph for authentication, they are often taken as historically true, regardless of the fact that they exist simply as a product of our culture's imagination. Furthermore, in the American West, myths have been actualized with the assistance of the photograph's authenticity, contrary to necessity, as Barthes has suggested. By upending photographic truth with regard to the West, my images confront how the West has been depicted both

⁵¹ Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Hill & Wang, 1980), 87.

⁵² *Ibid.*, 87-88.

on a historical and contemporary level and question the photograph's existence as a purveyor of myth.



Fig. 23 *Cowboy Fast Draw Championships, Will Bill Days, Deadwood, South Dakota, 2009*

Chapter 5 Conclusion

When I began photographing and researching the components that would come together as *True West*, I was not quite sure what it was that drew me to this topic. Relocating to Rochester, New York from Bozeman, Montana, there was always something that kept me longing for the West. I had been making photographs about representation and our relationship with the natural world through Natural History Museum dioramas but felt there was something personal lacking in my approach to imagemaking. I spent most of my summer of 2008 in New York City and became very curious about the assumptions people made when I told them that I was from Montana. Upon leaving New York City, I took a trip back to Montana and started making the first images that led to the *True West* project.

I grew up with an undeniable passion for the West. I was born in Oklahoma, the edge of the frontier, and grew up vacationing in the mountains of Montana. When I finally moved to Montana on my own, it was as if a part of me felt more complete. Looking back after I moved to Rochester to pursue my MFA, I came to realize that a big part of the West I had fallen in love with was this same imagined version of the West that had been perpetuated for one hundred years or more. Those first images I made toward the end of the summer that influenced *True West* were unknowingly a result of this passion. I became even more interested in this notion of the imagined West after discovering that easterners who had very limited experiences with the West shared the same fascination about the region as myself.

Building on my previous interests in representation and display, I was unknowingly creating similar images in the West. Once I came to this realization, I began

to exploit photography's ability as a representational tool. I looked to the precedence photography had already placed on the imagined West not only for inspiration but as a way to justify why it was that I had such a strong desire to make these photographs. Rooting *True West* conceptually around the notion of photographic truth helped to strengthen my concern with myth and authenticity. Returning to Montana for the entire summer of 2009 provided me with the opportunity to immerse myself within my topic, allowing me to explore the existence of the myth that saturated my everyday experiences while out West.

My MFA thesis *True West*, culminated in the *True West* exhibition, where my photographic imagery was displayed, allowing me to visualize this contemporary consideration of the imagined West. In total, there were twenty-eight photographs of various sizes, predominately hung in simple wooden frames. I utilized the entire SPAS gallery, giving each image its own space to breathe while still placing the photographs close enough together that associations between images could be made. Sequencing became an important consideration when preparing the exhibition; it allowed me to create an even more complex discussion through the pairing of certain images, or sets of images together. Sequencing also caused me to reconsider my photographic experience and how this thread of an imagined West permeated the region, regardless of where I went.

Assessing the project in its entirety at this point, I've become aware of the nonexistence and negligence with regard to specific parts of western history. Nowhere in my exhibition, or in the West itself for that matter, is the cowboy of color, the homosexual cowboy or the immigrant discussed. Each of these classifications were in fact a large part of what made the West what it was, though they have been set aside for

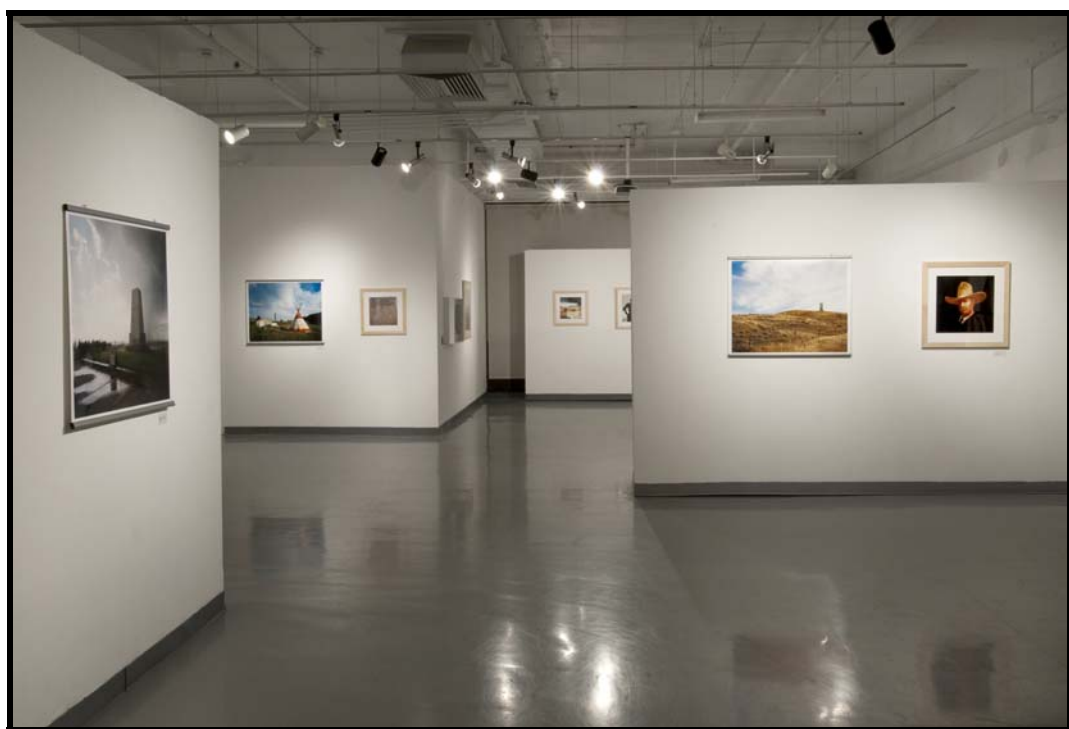


Fig. 24 *True West* Exhibition

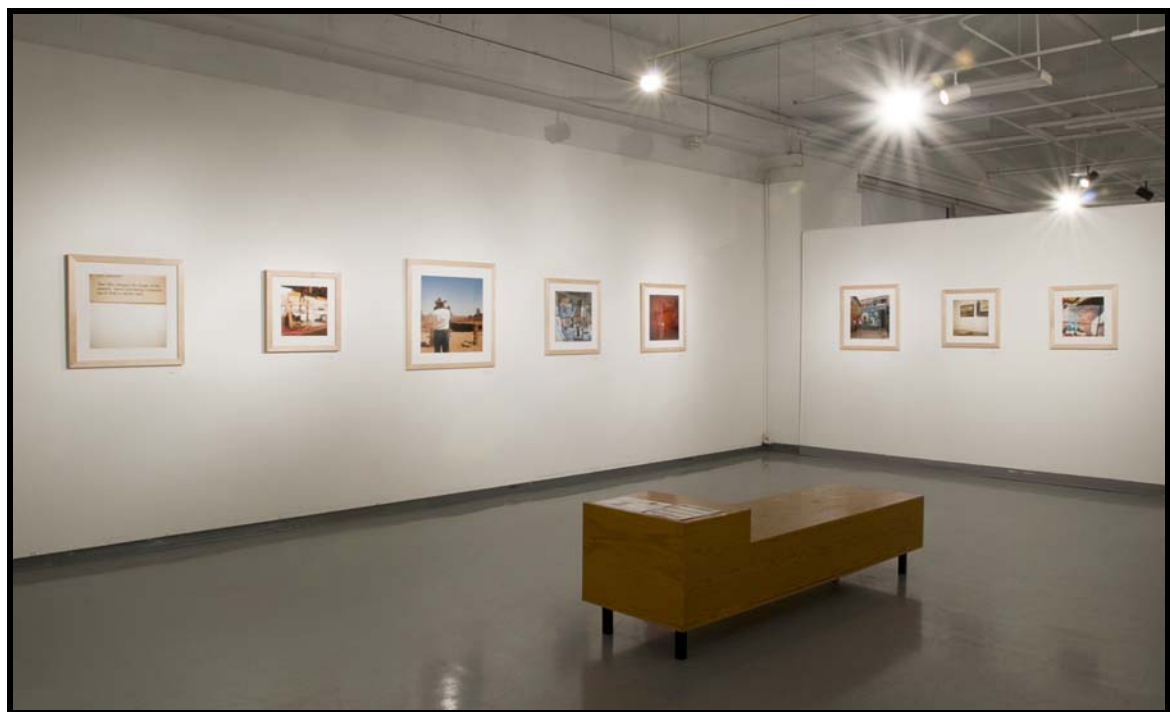


Fig. 25 *True West* Exhibition

the seemingly more marketable, culturally accepted, white heterosexual hero. This is something I would like to consider in the future when continuing with aspects of this body of work. However, I'm interested in how *True West*, potentially through its exclusion of what could be considered 'the other,' does in fact point out our lack of recognition of these character's importance within our history.

Additionally, *True West* has allowed me to confront the notion that by photographing the saturation of the imagined West, I am both perpetuating the myth and pointing to its absurdity. This aspect of the work has been hard to come to terms with. I feel that because I am so entrenched within this myth that I am pointing out the faults within myself as a westerner. As a mythmaker, I would look to two images that I made toward the completion of this project as a way to relate my feelings about the imagined West. *Dodge City, Kansas* shows a vacant storefront with its windows plastered over with small American flags. Right at eye level there is a patched up bullet hole in the glass, a referent to not only Dodge City's history and contemporary marketing ploy as a rough and tumble frontier town of the Old West, but also a metaphor for how our perception of the West problematizes our American identity still today. As a counterpoint to *Dodge City, Kansas*, a second image titled *Western Clothing Store*, taken just blocks away, communicates a sense of lightheartedness for the whole situation. The child mannequin, dressed up in some skewed version of modern cowboy attire, stares through the department store window with a smug grin on his face, as if the complex intertwining of authenticity and fabrication were all okay. I see this juxtaposition as a metaphor for my own struggle as both myth-perpetuator and myth-refuter. I am deeply invested in the myth of the West; it is what partially drew me westward and something that still defines

this region that I have such a strong connection with. At the same time, I am amazed that culture has chosen to highlight a mostly fabricated hero while denying such a rich history. I only hope that by pointing to these complexities we can begin to understand how inaccurate our perception of the American West really is.



Fig. 26 *Dodge City, Kansas, 2009*



Fig. 27 *Western Clothing Store,
Dodge City, Kansas, 2009*

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